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Thoughts on Benedict's Good Friday Q&A

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tIn a move without any direct precedents, Pope Benedict XVI went on Italian television today to respond to seven questions chosen from among 3,000 submitted by ordinary people from all over the world. Although this was certainly not a hard-hitting ?Meet the Press?-style encounter, the pope?s answers nevertheless inevitably carry news interest.

tThe following are three quick observations about the importance of Benedict XVI?s television outing.

Communications Strategy

tA pope responding to questions from the general public on TV is a bit reminiscent of what Samuel Johnson once said of a dog walking on its hind legs ? what?s striking is not so much how well he does it, but that he does it at all.

Similarly, at one level the important thing about Benedict?s TV appearance isn?t so much what he said, but the fact it happened.

tIn a nutshell, today?s television appearance ? like Benedict offering the ?Thought for the Day? on the BBC for Christmas eve, or the recent launch of a Facebook page for the beatification of John Paul II, or the new youth catechism ? reflects the plain-as-potatoes fact that the Vatican has a communications problem, and is trying, in fits and starts, to do something about it.

It?s also a reflection of the Vatican?s understanding that Benedict XVI, left to his own devices, is often a very effective communicator. As a result, they?re looking for ways to showcase him ? especially in venues in which the agenda isn?t set by the media, and in which the pope?s words aren?t sliced and diced by a media filter.

tOne of Benedict?s gifts is the ability to express complex theological ideas in ways that don?t require a Ph.D. to grasp. Today, for instance, an Italian woman whose son has been in a vegetative coma for two years asked the pope what happens to her son?s soul.

tIn response, Benedict XVI offered a homespun analogy: The soul is still present in the body, even if the body can?t express it ? like a guitar, he said, with broken strings.

tBenedict went on to express confidence that the son can still sense his mother?s love, and said her presence at his side is a great witness to faith in God and in life.

tIn terms of method, today?s broadcast thus can be understood as part of an emerging Vatican communications strategy to find opportunities for the pope himself to speak about the essentials of the faith ? apart from, and in addition to, trying to put out fires related to various crises in Catholic life. The idea is to project a different and

more positive storyline, taking advantage of the pope?s chops as a communicator and his celebrity status as a newsmaker.

Outreach to Islam

tBenedict?s post-Regensburg effort to reach out to Muslims was also palpable in today?s broadcast.

Benedict?s speech in Regensburg, Bavaria, in September 2006, memorably set off a firestorm of protest across the Islamic world for appearing to link Muhammad with violence. In the years since, Benedict has made outreach to the Islamic world a clear inter-faith priority.

tToday, in response to a question from Iraq, Benedict XVI said he is praying for the persecuted Christians of Iraq and hopes they?ll find a way to stay rather than to emigrate. Yet he says the Vatican is concerned not only for Iraq Christians but Muslims too, both the Shi?ite and Sunni communities, and says that the church wants to play a role in the construction of an Iraq based on diversity and dialogue.

tBenedict also took a question from a Muslim woman in the Ivory Coast, the only one of the seven questions explicitly identified as coming from a non-Christian. The question dealt with the violence currently scarring that African nation.

tIn response, Benedict said that Jesus was a man of peace and that the church wants to support peace initiatives, recalling that he has dispatched Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, as his personal envoy to the Ivory Coast to try to mediate the conflict.

tIt?s striking that the only non-Christian groups Benedict mentioned by name were Muslims, and the Vatican went out of its way to identify one of the questions as coming from a Muslim. All this reflects the importance Benedict attaches to what he defined during his May 2009 trip to the Holy Land as an ?Alliance of Civilizations? with Islam, especially vis-à-vis Western secularism.

A theologian, not a mystic

tWe also caught glimpses today of the fact that while Benedict XVI is a gifted theologian and a man of deep faith, he?s no mystic.

The final three questions ? about Jesus? descent into Hell, his post-resurrection body, and the prospect of another papal consecration of the world to Mary ? gave Benedict the chance to engage in some cosmic rumination or end-time speculation, and each time he demurred.

tOn the descent into Hell, Benedict said in effect that we shouldn?t get hung up on the details, that this was a journey of the soul rather than a physical movement across space. The point, he said, is that the salvation of Christ embraces all people regardless of when they lived ? its effectiveness didn?t begin, he said, in the year 0 or 30.

tBenedict also resists speculating much about the post-resurrection body of Jesus, preferring instead to focus on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

tFinally, in reply to the question on Mary, we got a further example of Benedict?s famed ?Marian cool?.

Other popes, he said ? Pius XII, Paul VI, and John Paul II ? all engaged in dramatic public consecrations of the world to Mary. Though he didn?t add the point himself, those actions usually came in response to pleas for such a consecration associated with great Marian apparitions, such as Fatima in Portugal.

tAt this stage, Benedict said, there?s no need for another ?great act? of consecration. Instead, he said, what?s important is allowing our own hearts to be entrusted to Mary. Because Mary is the image of the church, he said, that also implies entrusting ourselves to the church, loving the church as a mother.
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tIn all three instances, Benedict took questions that seemed to invite an esoteric response and turned it into an occasion for delivering a fairly simple pastoral message. That, too, could be seen as an expression of his desire to communicate effectively ? and his ability to do so, at least when the time, place and subjects are basically under his control.

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